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**GIVING TENANTS A VOICE:  
THE NON-PROFIT TENANT INVOLVEMENT  
PROJECT EVALUATION**

Social Planning & Research Council

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of Hamilton-Wentworth

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A United Way Member Agency




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THE NON-PROFIT TENANT INVOLVEMENT  
PROJECT EVALUATION**

November, 1996

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Non-Profit Tenant Involvement Project was a pilot project of Labourhood Homes Resource Centre and the Hamilton and Area Coalition of Tenants Associations (H.A.C.T.A.). The Social Planning and Research Council was hired to evaluate this program and to provide recommendations regarding the successful strategies utilized by the project to meet the projects objectives.

While the project was originally developed to:

- provide education, advocacy and support to tenants and non-profit Boards of Directors to facilitate the democratic election of tenants to non-profit Boards;
- organize tenants associations;
- provide meaningful tenant representation on non-profit Boards;
- and lastly, to establish joint board/tenant committees,

with changes in policy direction within the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, specifically the revoking of mandatory tenant representation on non-profit Boards, the focus of the project changed. The project spent most of its resources providing education, advocacy and support for tenants, and organizing tenants associations as a means of providing tenants with a voice in their communities.

This evaluation used 4 separate methods of data collection to ensure the most accurate assessment of this pilot project. The 4 components were; tenant survey, tenant focus group, in-person interview with project staff person, and telephone interviews with management staff.

All told, 8 tenants associations received support from the project. Seven themes were developed from the information gathered through the four methodologies and are as follows; role of the association, time frame of the project, quality of life, inclusivity, tenant/management relationships, effectiveness of the project, and the future of tenant involvement.

### **Role of the Tenants Association**

Clarity of role was identified as an issue by many participants. A confusing or misunderstood role often leads to internal difficulty within an association. It is the responsibility of the community development worker to define the purpose of the association at the beginning stage of group development.

The main functions of the association are; organizing social events, fundraising, and encouraging participation from all tenants. Representing the general concerns of tenants to management is another role for the association.

### **Time Frame of the Project**

It is apparent that the time frame for this project was too short. Tenants associations need ongoing staff support to thrive, and while this support will decrease once the association is up and running, there will be times during the life of the association when staff will be required to mediate, facilitate or support the group. Without continued support, tenants associations are in danger of becoming dysfunctional and ultimately may even fail.

### **Quality of Life**

Tenants, management and project staff generally agreed that tenants associations can improve the quality of life in communities. Associations give people a place to go with their concerns, develop a strong social network among tenants, may be the catalyst for improvements to the building/complex, provide a forum where tenants can create solutions to problems within the community, and increase the potential of tenants to positively influence management decisions.

### **Inclusivity**

The project did some work around including tenants from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the associations, however, much more could have been done. Without the continued resources of the project, there is little hope that significant inclusive practices will occur, due to the expense inherent in this work.

### **Tenant/Management Relationships**

A formal mechanism whereby tenants could influence management decisions did not have time to develop. Only one-quarter of tenants surveyed said their association had a process for influencing management decisions, while less than half the management staff said that the associations in their buildings/complexes had been successful at influencing management decisions. There were a couple of tenant/management meetings organized through the project that were successful because they opened up lines of communication between management and tenants. However, this was another area that required more time to develop.

### **Effectiveness of the Project**

Tenants and management staff were generally satisfied with the resources of the project, many tenants would have been unable to participate without project resources such as providing child care.

### **Future of Tenant Involvement**

There is a future for tenant involvement because of the positive benefits associations have on housing communities. However, with cut-backs to non-profit housing budgets, and the fact that this project did not receive continued funding, it is apparent there is little to no money to support associations. Without resources, associations will be left to flounder on their own.



## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

1. Tenants want to be involved in their communities and to participate in the decisions that affect their lives.
2. Tenants associations need the long-term support of a professional community developer to become established and to function successfully.
3. Both management and tenants need to have a clear understanding of the role of a tenants association and what it can and cannot accomplish before the association is established.
4. Misconceptions and past experiences with tenants associations may hinder tenant participation on associations. Clarifying role and purpose during initial organizing should alleviate anxiety and encourage participation.
5. Associations need access to professional facilitation and mediation skills to work through group issues and problems as they arise. Without this support, associations falter and may disband, leaving tenants with negative experiences and bitter feelings about associations. In these cases, associations may be more damaging to quality of life for tenants than never having an association.
6. It is more cost-efficient to resolve issues as they appear, than to try to work out issues that have manifested over time into complex and entrenched problems.
7. Associations need training in skills such as writing a constitution, committee structure, book-keeping, and developing mechanisms for tenants to influence management.
8. An outside mediator is useful for resolving tenant/tenant and tenant/management conflicts.
9. Non-profit housing budgets cannot always provide community development support and may indeed be in a conflict of interest to do so since a worker hired and paid for by management and not the tenants would have a natural bias to side with management in any disputes. An independent tenant organizer would be able to support many associations in a cost-efficient and non-conflictual manner.
10. Because tenants have a right to participate in the decisions that effect their lives, and because tenants create the most effective solutions to problems within their own communities, tenants need to be able to develop a mechanism which allows them to positively impact on management decisions.



## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Non-Profit Tenant Involvement Project was presented to the Ministry of Housing by Labourhood Homes Resource Centre and the Hamilton and Area Coalition of Tenants Associations (H.A.C.T.A.) when the provincial government required Boards of Directors of non-profit housing portfolio's to elect tenant representatives to their Boards. To this end, the objectives of this pilot project were four fold:

- to provide education, advocacy and support to tenants and non-profit Boards of Directors to facilitate the democratic election of tenants to non-profit Boards;
- to organize tenants associations;
- to provide meaningful tenant representation on non-profit Boards;
- and lastly, to establish joint board/tenant committees.

The work of the project was to be evaluated by an outside non-profit organization and was to include recommendations regarding the successful strategies utilized by the project to meet the above objectives. The Social Planning and Research Council was hired to evaluate this program and to provide recommendations.

With changes in policy direction within the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing after the project was funded, specifically the revoking of mandatory tenant representation on Boards, the focus of the project changed. Without the requirement of tenant representation on Boards, and with all the uncertainty around the future of non-profit housing, it appeared that non-profit housing organizations hesitated on becoming involved with this project. Without the endorsement for tenant representatives on Boards by some of the non-profits, the project instead turned to organizing tenants associations as a means of providing tenants with a voice in their communities.

Tenants associations are one method of citizen participation tenants can be involved with to make positive changes to their housing community. Bracht & Tsouros offer a definition of citizen participation that can be used for the purpose of this study.

Citizen participation refers to the social process of taking part (voluntarily) in either formal or informal activities, programmes and/or discussions to bring about a planned change or improvement in community life, services and/or resources (1990, 201).

Citizen participation is an important factor in the health and well-being of individuals and their communities. Siler-Wells draws attention to the reality of modern community in relation to health. She points out that the first step to strengthening community health is by strengthening the community itself (1988, 7). In modern urban society, communities have become large, complex and impersonal. The old social and economic local



networks have broken down and people have begun to lose control over local problems. Decisions come to be made without the knowledge of community members, or an understanding of their aspirations, by people who may not even live in that community (Siler-Wells, 1988). A key component to strengthening the community is to involve community members in the process of planning their services and solving local problems.

Bjaras et al. (1991) also discuss that the process of citizen participation actually changes the norms and values of community members regarding the problems being addressed and that this change itself is the goal of community intervention studies. These authors also support the positive impact of citizen participation "the wider the range of activities, the greater the participation, and the greater the participation, the better the effect" for community health (1991, 199). The more people are encouraged and facilitated into the citizen participation process, the stronger the community will be and the more enriched will be community life. Head (1971) also notes that citizen participation groups can uncover and liberate large reserves of energy and ability that have been, for the most part, untapped in the past. This ideal is expanded by Kretzmann & McKnight (1993) who state that even the most disadvantaged communities have capacities and skills that can be brought into play to improve community life.

Tenants associations are one way that tenants can be involved in the decision-making processes that effect their lives and their communities. This evaluation includes the ideology of citizen participation in its analysis.

## **2.0 METHODOLOGY**

This evaluation utilized 4 separate methods of data collection to ensure the most accurate assessment of this pilot project. The 4 components were; tenant survey, tenant focus group, in-person interview with project staff person, and telephone interviews with management staff.

### **2.1 Tenant Survey**

The tenant survey was developed by the evaluation committee. This committee was comprised of the project evaluator, the project staff person and 3 tenants involved in both the project and in their tenants associations. The objectives of the project were used in the development of the survey, as well as the tenants own experiences with tenants associations. (See Appendix A for questionnaire).

The survey was distributed at a tenants conference in early March 1996. Response from this distribution was low, therefore the project staff person and evaluation committee members distributed surveys to members of tenants associations that the project had been involved in organizing. Surveys were received from tenants involved in project-supported associations, tenants involved in associations that were not supported by this project, and tenants whose buildings did not have any association. This was the only methodological tool that included input from tenants whose associations were not supported by the project.

### **2.2 Tenant Focus Group**

A tenant focus group was held with an independent facilitator to obtain in-depth qualitative information on the impact of the project-supported associations in their community. The session was 2 hours in length, on a weekday evening, and 9 tenants attended the session. The questions were broadly based around; quality of life issues, how the association was functioning, management, and satisfaction with the services of the project.

### **2.3 Project Staff Interview**

A key informant questionnaire was developed by the evaluator based on the program objectives and with input from the project staff person. (See Appendix B for questionnaire). The evaluator interviewed the project staff and recorded the responses in writing on the questionnaire. The interview lasted about one hour.

## **2.4 Management Telephone Survey**

The management questionnaire was developed by the evaluation committee. The evaluator called all eight projects and was able to talk to 6 management staff, representing 6 different non-profit housing communities. Telephone interviews lasted, on average, about 10 minutes. (See Appendix C for questionnaire).

## 3.0 FINDINGS

### 3.1 Tenant Survey

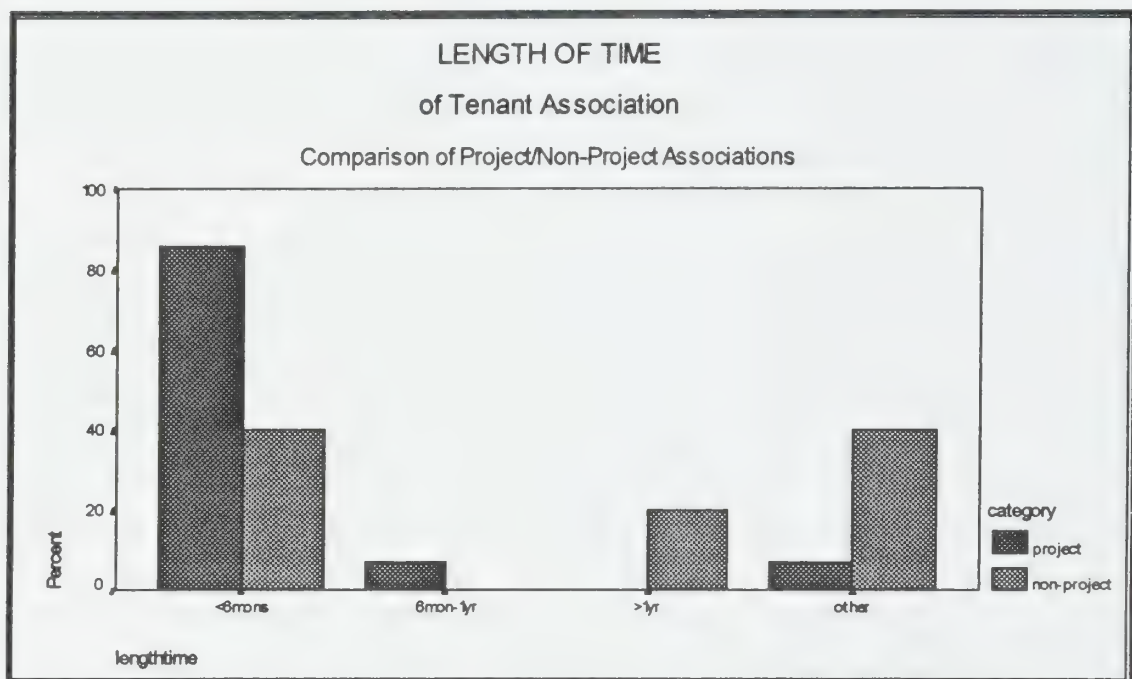
Overall, 32 surveys were returned to the evaluator. Thirteen surveys were received from tenants living in private market units where there was not an active tenants association. Of the remaining surveys, 14 were received from tenants involved in a project-supported tenants association, while only 5 were received from tenants involved in non-project supported tenants associations. However, the majority of tenants who completed the survey were active in their tenants association or building.

Comparisons between project-supported associations and non-project associations must be interpreted cautiously for three reasons. Firstly, because of the small number of responses from non-project tenants, and secondly because of the unequal representation between project and non-project associations. Thirdly, in keeping with the mandate of the project, all of the project-supported tenants live in non-profit housing, while only 80% of non-project associated tenants do. As the relationship between tenants and management in non-profit and private market housing differs, this impacts on the functioning of a tenants association. For these reasons, comparisons between project supported and non-project associations were not extensively analysed.

Comparisons of associations were made on a structural basis only. The social ramifications of associations were discussed only in the context of the project supported associations.

### 3.1.1 Comparisons between Project Supported and Non-Project Tenant Associations

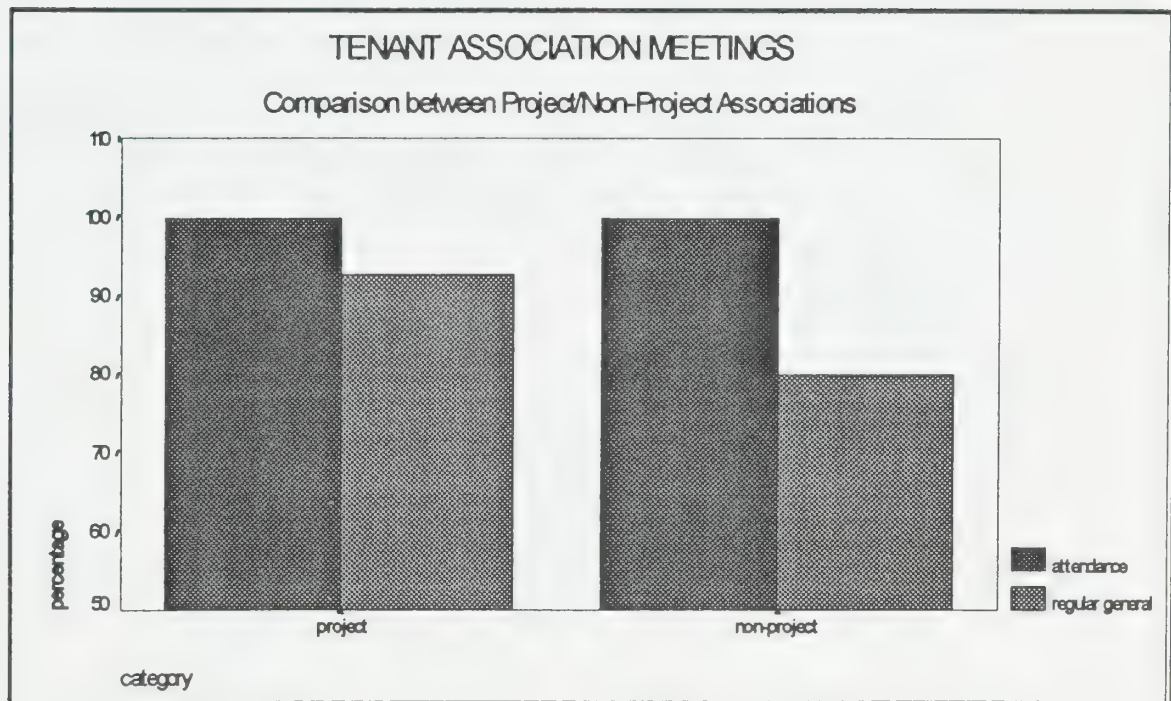
Figure 3.1



Significantly, 86% of tenant associations organized by the project were less than 6 months old, compared to only 40% of non-project associations. Although the project worked with two associations that were already established, none of the tenants surveyed belonged to project supported associations that were older than one year, while 60% of the non-project supported associations were over 1 year in length, one being 16 years old!



Figure 3.2



All tenants who responded said they had attended at least one tenants meeting in their building. Project-supported associations were more likely to hold regularly scheduled tenants meetings (93%), compared to non-project associations (80%). As well, more project respondents held either a general or executive membership in their tenants associations (100%), as compared to 67% of non-project respondents.

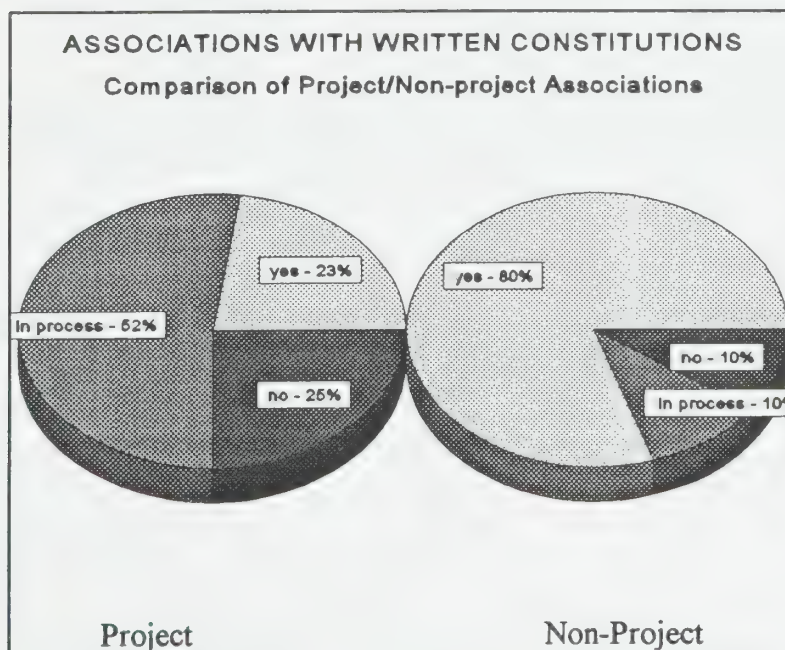


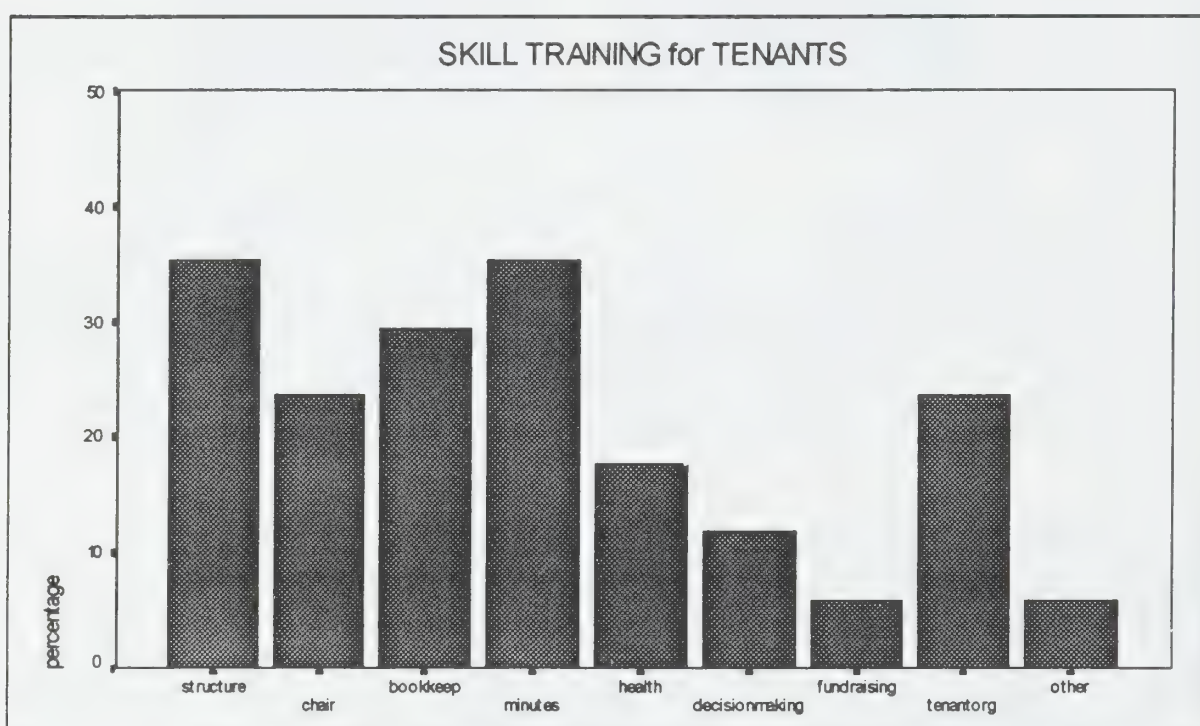
Figure 3.3

While more non-project associations have a written constitution than project-supported associations; more project-supported associations were in the process of developing a constitution, then non-project associations. In all, 75% of project-supported associations either had a written constitution or were in the process of developing one.

79% of project associations have formed, or are in the process of forming, executive committees, while 75% of non-project associations have executive committees. Of the associations that had executive committees, 31% of project associations elected representatives to these committees, as compared to 100% of non-project associations.

### 3.1.2 Project Supported Tenant's Associations

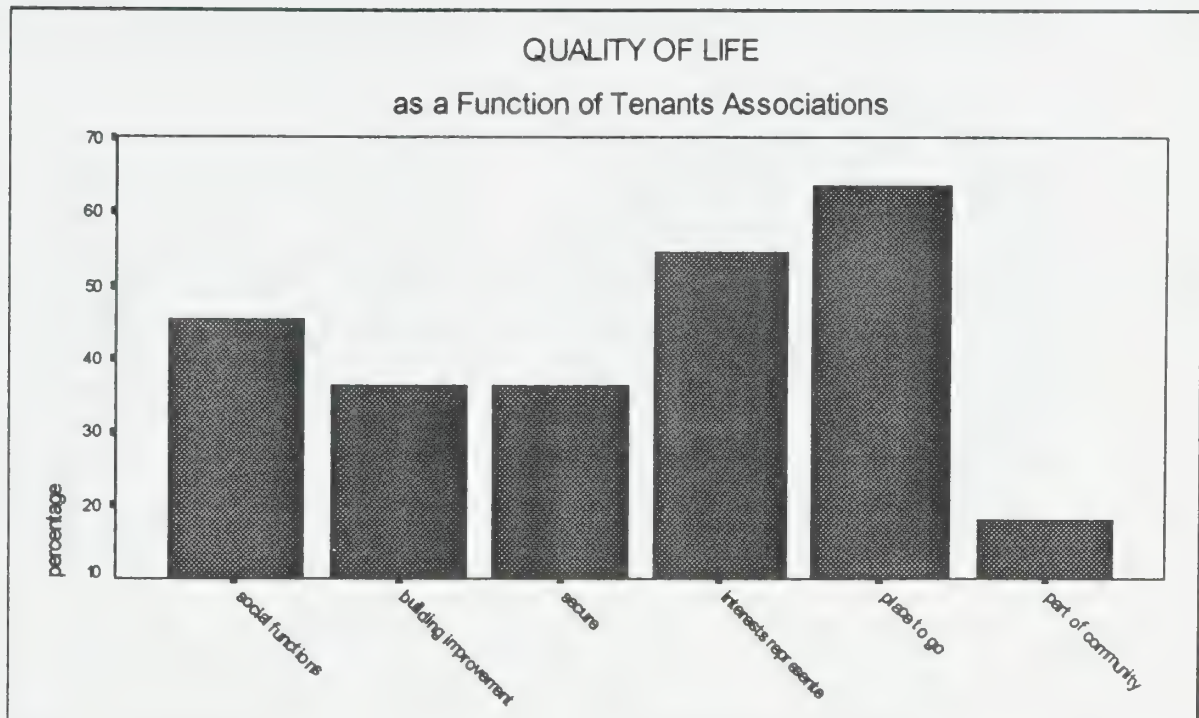
Figure 3.4



Training tenants in the skills needed for tenants associations was another key component to this project. The most training was received in committee structure and minute taking (38% respectively). While only 31% of respondents received bookkeeping training at the time of the survey, a later bookkeeping session was held and nine tenants attended. Therefore, over the life of the project, bookkeeping training for tenants was the highest utilized skill development session.



Figure 3.5

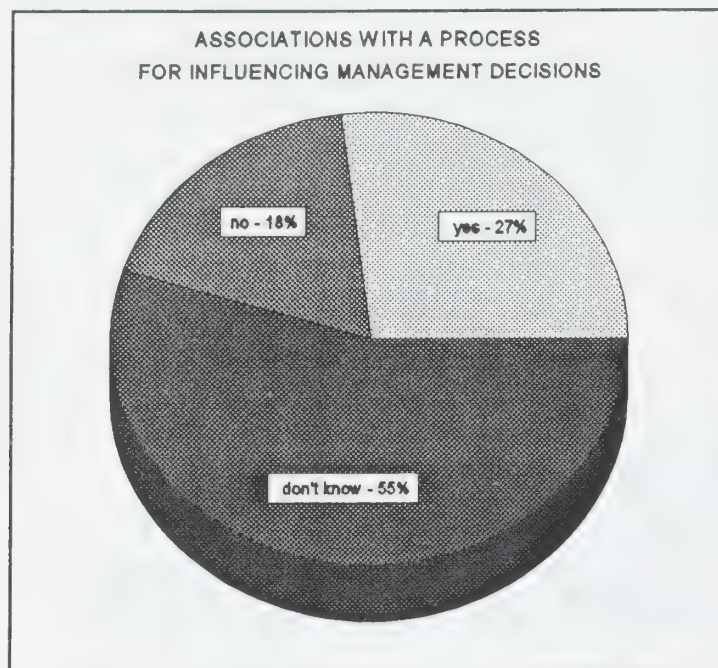


Quality of life was assessed as an important function of tenant organizing. The biggest improvement in quality of life for tenants because of the tenants association, was that 62% of tenants said that they now felt like they had a place to go with their concerns. Other significant improvements to quality of life as a function of the tenants association were: more social functions were organized in the building (50%); interests of tenants represented by the association (46%); and, improvements made to the physical building (42%).

One of the important functions of a tenants association is to represent the interests of all tenants, including those from diverse cultural backgrounds. When asked if their associations reflected the ethnic diversity of tenants in the building, 54% of project respondents said either 'very' or 'somewhat' reflective of the ethnic diversity in their building. 15% said their associations were 'not at all' reflective.

We asked if tenant associations were connected to any other tenant community-based groups for support should the pilot project not be renewed. 29% of project respondents said they were connected with H.A.C.T.A., 7% said they were connected with United Tenants of Ontario, none of the respondents said they were connected to the Social Housing Access Committee. Since the time of the project, H.A.C.T.A. has lost 100% of its budget.

Figure 3.6



Lastly, we asked tenants if their associations had a process for influencing management decisions.

Of those who said yes, 36% influence management through tenant meetings, 36% by inviting management to attend tenant association meetings, 36% use tenant representatives to contact management, 36% use written communication, 18% sit on the Board of Directors, 9% have joint tenant/management committees. Percentages do not round to 100% because some associations use more than 1 mechanism.

### 3.2 Tenant Focus Group

The questions asked in the focus group were open-ended enough to elicit a thorough accounting of tenants experiences in the project-supported tenants association. Responses were categorized by: quality of life; functions of an association; relationships with management; and effectiveness of resources.

#### 1. Quality of Life

Around quality of life issues, tenants initially stated that starting an association, or an association experiencing internal difficulty made life more miserable for involved tenants, but that in the long run a good association improved the quality of life for tenants. Tenants felt that one of the essential strategies for ensuring that tenants have a positive experience in their association was to provide a clear understanding of what the association can accomplish. Because some people have unrealistic expectations regarding the purpose and goals of the association, this can lead to problems if these expectations are not addressed immediately. In some communities, the Board and management supported the tenants association and this was an important factor

in improving the quality of life of tenants involved in the association. Participants saw associations as improving quality of life because they connect people, encourage and facilitate dialogue, and assist tenants in working together. This social network also improves security in communities and associations can also work on concrete ways of improving security.

## 2. Functions of a Tenants Association

Participants described what they felt were the appropriate functions of an association. These functions can be categorized by issues, internal dynamics and fundraising.

### a) issues with which the association should be involved

The participants felt that the association should deal with group disputes that were common to most or all tenants (for example, around rent issues) but should not get involved in individual cases.

Some tenants saw the association as having a social function more than anything - as a social club where tenants could interact - instead of a means for making improvements in the building. Participants felt that the association was good for organizing social events such as barbeques or kids events.

### b) internal dynamics of the association

Firstly, participants said that it is important to get tenants out to general meetings. Circulating a flyer with a notice of meetings as well as specific items to be discussed works well, and associations can be successful with enough planning and notice circulation. Distributing surveys to find out what tenant issues are can also be useful in getting people out, but sometimes management is threatened by this strategy.

Secondly, members need to make a time commitment to the association for it to be effective.

One of the inhibitors to success is the perception by some tenants that the association is just a "bitch committee" where nothing is accomplished. Another inhibitor to success is when members can't agree on proposed actions.

### c) fundraising

An important function of the association is to fundraise for events. Fundraising was seen as a good way for



tenants to get to know their neighbours and their communities. Suggestions for fundraising were - 50/50 tickets, donated prizes and garage sales.

### 3. Relationship with Management

Participants felt that a relationship between management and the association was important for influencing management decisions. If the association used the right approach with management, they would be effective in influencing decisions. Management representatives attended tenant meetings in one community. Some of the problems participants associations had experienced with management included: red tape in management; management is hard to access; tension between management and association caused by management apprehension about a survey of tenants; and, management not cooperating easily with association activities.

### 4. Effectiveness of Resources

#### a) of the project

Participants were generally satisfied with the resources of the project. Meeting rooms, access to office support, and skill development and training in group process were seen as useful resources of the project.

#### b) of the building/association

Participants said that a hobby/social room in their community was an important resource. A computer and printer would also be useful for associations, either in the building or through the project. Participants stated that some buildings don't have enough resources to keep the association going.

## **3.3 Project Staff Interview**

The first set of questions was designed to reveal the initial process of contacting tenants about the project.

Staff contacted the Ministry of Housing for a list of all the non-profit projects in the Hamilton-Wentworth region.

A letter of introduction was then mailed to all projects. Staff then followed up with phone calls to arrange meetings with management to discuss the project.

Over the year of the project, 8 non-profit buildings/complexes participated in the project. They did not all join at once, some becoming involved later in the life of the project. Some of the first buildings to participate did so because they had always supported tenant involvement and they appreciated the resources the project could bring to associations.

Those buildings that chose not to participate were not always clear to the staff person in their reasons for refusing. The main reason seemed to be that with the changes to housing legislation, management decided to wait to hear what was happening provincially before they made a commitment to the project. One non-profit refused because they already had a staff person doing this type of work.

In four cases, tenants contacted the project staff person and asked for assistance. The staff person was unsure of how these tenants initially found out about the project. In another situation, the staff person contacted a tenant that management suggested might be interested.

The second set of questions dealt with the process of organizing or supporting associations.

Associations were organized or supported in 8 different communities. 3 were relatively new buildings/complexes and there was tenant interest in starting a tenants association. 3 had previously had associations that were now defunct, and 2 had dysfunctional associations that were struggling to work through past problems. These 2 associations took time and resources for conflict resolution before they were able to move forward.

The associations are all in different stages of evolution. Most are fairly informal with consensus decision-making, volunteer (not elected) positions, shared work, etc. The stages were dependent on when the association was formed, and the type of committee work members brought to the association. In a couple of cases, organized tenant/management meetings were highly successful. These meetings opened communication networks that benefit both sides, by making managements job easier because tenants can understand where and why decisions are made, and by stopping little issues from building into big issues.

Associations had access to appropriate training sessions during a tenant conference in March. The conference served as a way to connect people to the broader tenants movement, while providing practical training and information on how to start a tenants association, how to run effective meetings, how to handle money, etc.. It gave people a chance to talk to others who were working on tenants associations in their communities. A

bookkeeping session was held at a later date and 9 tenants attended. Staff also modelled appropriate facilitation techniques, minute taking, etc.

The third set of questions asked the staff person about her professional experiences throughout the year of the project.

In regards to relations with management, the staff person said that “the most successful relationships occurred where management and tenants were initially involved with the project”. If tenants made the first contact with the project, the staff person then called management staff to explain her role and the objectives of the project, but management tended to be a bit wary in these circumstances. Some management staff had legitimate concerns, others weren’t sure of the staff role. The project staff speculated that the management staff might have felt threatened by the project. The project staff had to take on an advocacy role in some situations by reminding management that tenants have a right to organize.

The project staff felt that the resources of the project were essential for providing tenants with the opportunity to form associations, especially to women who required babysitting services. The project also had a role in connecting people to the broader tenants movement, and to other resources in the community, such as H.A.C.T.A..

The project staff felt that “there was a real value in having an outside organizer come in and help tenants organize because staff from the non-profit have a conflicting role because they are the landlord”. Also, that supporting volunteers in the association leads to an enhanced community life and there was a great potential for tenants to positively influence management decisions.

However, the staff person felt that the project didn’t go far enough in including diversity in tenants associations. While the project did do flyers in other languages, it had a long way to go to make people feel more comfortable about participating. Funds for translation in meetings is an important piece of making associations more inclusive.

### **3.4 Management Telephone Survey**

The first set of questions was designed to reveal managements reaction to first contact from the project, and managements view of the role of a tenants association.



In five of the six interviews, management said they had responded positively to the initial contact from the project. Four said that they realized how important a constructive strong association was to community life, and two wanted project help because their associations were experiencing difficulties and they didn't want to see them dissolve. One person said that an association was important for encouraging tenants to develop a sense of ownership in their home.

One person said they decided not to respond to or participate in the project because of past frustrations with associations. They had tried three times in the past to start an association, but the tenants weren't interested.

When asked if any of their housing communities have a tenants association, three respondents said yes; that the project had organized 2 of the associations and worked with a third one that was already in existence. Three respondents said that they didn't have associations, although one said that they had one in the past. According to tenants, the project had, however, organized associations in all three of these buildings.

When asked what their view, as management, were on tenant involvement, four of the staff members said they had a positive one. Two said that tenants are the ones that create solutions to problems in the community and that they strengthen community. One said that because their community was so isolated, the social aspect of a tenants association was most important.

Another person said that while they thought the concept of tenant involvement was a good one, it takes a lot of time to get a group started and operating. Also groups need a clear understanding of the objectives of an association so they won't try to take over management's role. An experienced person was needed to give direction to the association.

Lastly, one staff person felt that associations don't work. In this person's experience, they have never been successful, although they seem to work in other communities.

Perceived roles of the association included; organizing social activities and doing community development work or interacting with the neighbourhood (sited by three staff). One staff person said the association's role was to represent tenants with their grievances with building workers, and another that it was a way of communicating the general wishes of tenants to management and electing tenant representatives to the Board of Directors. One person said that they didn't see a role for an association because tenants weren't enthusiastic about it, and two said that the question wasn't applicable to them since they didn't have an association in their building/complex.

The second set of questions tried to get a sense of the impact the tenants association had on the

housing community.

When asked if their housing community had changed since the association formed, three staffers responded that there hadn't been a change in the community, although one person felt that this was because the association was too new. One person said that she had noticed a gradual change; there were more activities for children, more social events and some fundraising events. Two said the question didn't apply to them because they didn't have an association.

The impact of the tenants association on influencing management decisions was an essential component of the project. Getting this feedback from management was an important part of evaluation. Two staff people said that the association had not influenced management decisions to date. One said it was because the association wasn't very organized and had some internal difficulties, however, she said that the building staff do respond to tenant complaints. The other person said that management was trying to get them involved in solving problems and in getting their input on some operational aspects of the complex, but to date the association had not been involved. This person said that the Board always considers the association in decision-making and asks for tenant opinions.

Two projects said that the association had been successful at influencing management decisions, but they didn't say how.

Staff were asked how they communicated with the tenants that lived in their buildings or complexes. One person said that 2 representatives from the tenants association meet with staff 2 days after the monthly tenants meeting to dialogue. Another said they communicate through flyers and newsletters.

One staff person said that the resident superintendent brings tenant requests to the organizations staff person, or tenants can call directly to their office. The staff person visits the building approximately twice a month.

At another building, a tenant councillor sits on the tenants association and gives guidance, direction and information through the councillor. Tenants have also asked for a meeting with Board members.

Two complexes send out a newsletter or letter from management on a regular basis and tenants can drop into the staff office.

Given the funding circumstances for the project, and for non-profit housing budgets, it was important to ask if management thought there was a future for tenants associations.



Three staff responded that there was definitely a future for tenant involvement as long as tenants show an interest. All felt that tenant involvement offered a positive benefit to their communities. Of these three, one said that some Board's may now be less willing to have tenants on their Board because they were no longer mandated to do so.

Two staff were unsure of the future of their associations due to internal difficulties that still need to be resolved and a lack of cohesion within associations. One said that because there was no longer a catalyst to make involvement happen (ie, the project), therefore, it was unlikely to.

Another staff said "no" due to government direction because associations need time and money to make them work and this was no longer available to tenants.

Lastly, management staff were asked if they found the project resources useful.

Three staff members said they found the resources and staff person of the project useful. Both were very happy with the project and one said that it built bridges between tenants and management that weren't there in the past. The same person said they found the professional mediation resources very useful and felt it was unfortunate the project had ended because tenants need to have this voice. Another staff member said that they couldn't have accomplished nearly as much with their association without the resources of the project.

One wasn't sure because she hadn't received any feedback from tenants regarding the project.

Two reported that the project had not organized tenant's associations in their buildings/complexes.



## 4.0 DISCUSSION

The Non-Profit Tenant Involvement Project ran from the Spring of 1995 to the Spring of 1996. During this time, the focus of the project was on meeting as many of the original objectives as possible. Due to the changes to mandatory requirements for tenant involvement on non-profit Boards, the project was not always able to meet these objectives but instead focused on organizing and supporting tenants associations as a way of giving tenants a voice in their housing communities. The original objectives for the project were:

- ◆ to provide education, advocacy and support to tenants and non-profit Boards of Directors to facilitate the democratic election of tenants to non-profit Board;
- ◆ to organized tenants associations;
- ◆ to provide meaningful tenant representation on non-profit Boards;
- ◆ and lastly, to establish joint board/tenant committees.

In practice, the project focused on providing education, advocacy and support for tenants, and to organizing tenants associations. All told, 8 tenants associations received support from the project, however no democratic election of tenants to the Board occurred in any of the communities being organized. Seven themes were developed from the information gathered through the four methodologies and are as follows; role of the association, time frame of the project, quality of life, inclusivity, tenant/management relationships, effectiveness of the project, and the future of tenant involvement.

### 4.1 Role of Association

The main goal of a tenants association is to provide an opportunity for tenants to participate in community life, and to have a say in the decisions that affect their homes and lives. All the tenants surveyed had attended at least one tenants meeting in their community. This is strong evidence that tenants are willing and eager to be involved in the communities in which they live. Tapping into and maintaining this initial enthusiasm takes long-term resources, time and community development experience, without which internal problems can result in people leaving the association bitter and disillusioned. The damage that occurs from dysfunctional groups can impact on the tenants willingness to ever become involved in their community again. This is supported by focus group participants, who said that some tenants have unrealistic expectations regarding the goals and purpose of the association and this confusion can lead to problems in the initial development of a new association. Similarly, tenants also have misconceptions or past experiences with associations that may inhibit them from wanting to start a new one. Focus group participants said that some tenants perceive the association as a “bitch committee” where nothing gets accomplished. Management, paralleling the viewpoint of tenants, also identified clarity of role as an issue that associations need to address. Tenants need to be aware of the

objectives of the association and should not try to take over management's role.

What ensures that tenant involvement is positive and meaningful is an association that is clear in purpose, has reasonable expectations for what it can accomplish, has experienced support in group facilitation, mediation and structure and has resources that facilitate access to all members of the community. Without the appropriate long-term support, associations can falter and tenants will drift away from them. From the survey, almost one-third of tenants that did not have a tenants association in their community responded that they didn't know if they needed one. This may be another indicator that people don't seem to have a good understanding of the purpose of a tenants association.

Focus group participants noted some of the functions that are appropriate for an association are: becoming involved with issues that are of common interest to most or all tenants in the community; fundraising for social events; and, encouraging all tenants to participate in the association. Strategies for accomplishing this included circulating a flyer advertising meetings, as well as an agenda of upcoming meeting topics. Surveys are one way of eliciting tenant opinion, but tenants felt that this strategy made management feel threatened and so might undermine support or at least ambivalence to the associations existence.

Management voiced very similar opinions on the role of tenants associations. Like tenants, they stated that the main function of the association was a social one, to organize social events and to build the community. Representing tenants with grievances and to convey the general wishes of tenants to management was also a role for tenants associations. In three communities, there was limited or no support for tenant associations with management. Indeed, two of the staff did not seem to be aware of associations that were being organized in their buildings. Some staff did not support the concept of associations and felt that they did not have a useful function, while another's past experience with associations had been negative. However, most participants in this evaluation agreed that tenants associations were positive for housing communities.

## **4.2 Time Frame of the Project**

Three-quarters of the associations supported by the project were less than 6 months old at the time of the evaluation. In the life of a group, this is an extremely short time frame and for the associations to grow in a positive and healthy manner, staff support would be required far beyond a 6 month period. Inadequate length of time was reflected in the percentage of project associations that had written constitutions and election of executive committee members. The 52% of associations in the process of developing a constitution was evidence that the project had initiated group development tools, but was unable to see these tools through to



completion. Similarly, the project did not have the time to develop executive committees or to implement election procedures for executive committee members.

Maintaining an association beyond this phase without direct staff involvement would be difficult for tenants who may not have group facilitation and mediation skills and the experience of working with groups. Because conflict is a natural and healthy part of group development, staff support is needed, not to prevent conflict, but rather to assist individuals and communities to problem-solve and work their way through conflict. Without this essential staff support, associations may become dysfunctional, creating bitter feelings within the community and rendering the association ineffective. Solving problems once they have occurred is much more time and resource consuming than maintaining a long-term healthy association.

Only a quarter of tenants associations surveyed had mechanisms for influencing management decisions, and less than a half of the management staff interviewed said that tenants had successfully influenced management decisions. This is another indicator that the associations had not matured sufficiently to develop such mechanisms. Although influencing management decisions was one of the overall goals of the project, the length of time for which the project was funded for was a serious inhibitor to reaching this goal.

Some management staff also stated that quality of life for tenants had not improved with the establishment of the tenants association, and suggested that this was because the associations were too new to have made any significant impact. Again, this supports the conclusion that the time frame for this project was not sufficient to develop all the roles of a strong tenants association.

Management staff, tenants and project staff all measured the length of time of an association as an indicator of success. Without staff support, associations may falter and disband, as had 3 of the associations the project re-established, and therefore will not be successful.

### **4.3 Quality of Life**

In both the survey and the focus group, tenants felt that associations improved the quality of life in their communities. In the survey responses, the major impacts of a tenants association included providing a place that tenants can go with concerns, and the occurrence of more social functions in the building. The former gives people a sense of control over the decisions that affect their lives, and the latter connects people with their neighbours and their community. The social network created by the association also has concrete by-products such as improving security. Having a mechanism whereby concerns can be discussed and resolved, as well



as a stronger social network, improves the quality of life for tenants. Some tenants also said that improvements had been made to the building since the association had formed.

However, focus group participants stated that an association in difficulty or conflict can make life miserable for tenants even though there are long-term social benefits to be gained by connecting people to one another, encouraging and facilitating dialogue, and teaching tenants to work together. These tenants stated that associations were more successful in improving quality of life when Boards and management supported the association.

Both the survey and focus group tenants paint a picture of the positive impacts an association can have on a community. However, the strength of this impact depends to a large degree on the support of a community organizer. Without a staff person to access as a resource when groups are experiencing difficulty, a tenants association can make life miserable for tenants, negating many of the long-term positive impacts an association can bring.

Management in five of the six communities interviewed felt that associations were important in building community life and in developing a sense of ownership of the property and staff who already had associations in their buildings/complexes did not want to see them dissolve. Staff were, in general, very supportive of the concept of associations for the following reasons; tenants create solutions to problems in the community and strength the community. Some management staff agreed that there had been a positive gradual change in the community because there were more social events and activities for children, however others had not noticed an improvement in quality of life because the association was too new.

Project staff felt that supporting volunteers in the association led to an enhanced community life and also to an increased potential for tenants to positively influence management decisions.

There appears to be a general consensus from all sectors represented in the research that a strong tenants association can have a positive impact on quality of life for tenants.

#### **4.4 Inclusivity**

Over half of tenants said that their associations were either 'very' or 'somewhat' reflective of the ethnic diversity in their building. While this is a start, more work is needed to ensure ethnically diverse people can participate in their tenants associations. However, due to the expense incurred by translating written material and to have translators attend tenant meetings, other resources, such as those provided by this project, are essential to

ensuring inclusivity. Without these resources, many tenants would be excluded from involvement in their communities.

The project staff person felt that the project didn't go far enough in including diversity in tenants associations. While the project did do flyers in other languages, it had a long way to go to make people feel more comfortable about participating. Funds for translation in meetings plays an important role in ensuring inclusivity in tenants associations.

While attempts were made to include people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, more work is needed in this area before success can occur. The recent cuts to non-profits operating budgets, and the ending of this project without chance for renewal, does not bode well for the development of inclusive tenants associations.

#### **4.5 Tenant/Management Relationships**

Only 27% of tenants had a process for influencing management decisions. In new associations, this mechanism may not have had time to develop, and all associations require the consent and cooperation of management before any mechanism can be implemented. Tenants felt that both the relationship between management and the association, and the mechanism for participation, were important for influencing management decisions. Some of the problems their associations had experienced with management included: red tape; barriers to access; tension between management and association; and, management not cooperating easily with association activities.

A facilitator may be required when tenants and management cannot develop appropriate mechanisms for dialogue. There may also be an advocacy role for the tenant organizer if tenants feel that management is unwilling to develop any mechanism for dialogue. This relationship between associations and management requires careful fostering and experienced facilitation to develop successfully.

Most management staff said they have indirect relationships with tenants, communicating through newsletters and flyers, and have an informal mechanism whereby tenants can "drop by" or call them during office hours. These mechanisms do not facilitate the development of a collective relationship between tenants and staff and if such collective mechanisms are to be developed, it falls to the tenants association to do so. This may be the reason that less than half of the staff said that the association had been successful at influencing management decisions because the tenants association were not organized enough to do so. Again, this lack of success can be explained by the inadequate time frame given for organizing the associations.

The project staff felt that, in a couple of cases, organized tenant/management meetings were highly successful. Opening communication networks benefits both sides, makes managements job easier because tenants can understand where and why decisions are made, and stops little issues from building into big issues.

The project staff person stated that “the most successful relationships occurred where management and tenants were initially involved with the project”. If tenants made the first contact with the project, management tended to be a bit wary. Some management staff had legitimate concerns, while others were unsure of the project staff’s role. The project staff speculated that management might have felt threatened by the project. The project staff had to take on an advocacy role in some situations by reminding management that tenants have a right to organize. These situations reinforce the need for an independent community organizer to educate both management and tenants about the role of the association and the organizer, as well as to facilitate a relationship between management and tenants.

#### **4.6 Effectiveness of the Project**

Participants were generally satisfied with the resources of the project. Meeting rooms, access to office support, and skill development and training in group process were seen as useful resources of the project. Tenants stated that most buildings don’t have the resources available to keep associations operating, therefore the resources of the project are necessary. Tenants received various levels of training from the project; committee structure, minute taking, and bookkeeping were the most utilized training sessions. These sessions are important because they give tenants the skills to maintain associations which leads to a decreased need for staff support.

The comparison between project supported and independent associations suggest that project tenants are more involved in their association because they identify themselves as ‘members’ of the association more often, and held regularly scheduled tenants meetings more often than independent associations. This commitment may be due, in part, to the resources the project was able to bring to associations, specifically child care for parents who otherwise would be unable to attend, and information disseminated in the languages spoken within each community.

Of the four management staff people who were aware that their communities had associations, three found the resources and staff person useful, citing relationship development between tenants and management, professional mediation, and the accomplishments of the association as reasons.

The project staff also felt that the resources of the project were essential for providing tenants with the



opportunity to form associations, especially to women who required babysitting services. The project also had a role in connecting people to the broader tenants movement, and to other resources in the community, such as HACTA. The project organized a tenants conference, provided access to training sessions, connected tenants with the broader tenants movement, provided practical information on developing an association, and staff modelled appropriate facilitation techniques, minute taking, etc.

These are resources and activities that non-profit housing budgets are not designed to support, and that are most cost effectively delivered through an independent project that can service many housing communities, instead of building these activities into individual housing budgets where services would be duplicated. The independence of the project also addresses the issue of conflict of interest that organizers hired by management face. Project staff felt that “there was a real value in having an outside organizer come in and help tenants organize because staff have a conflicting role because they are the landlord”.

#### **4.7 Future of Tenant Involvement**

Half the management staff felt strongly that there was a future for tenant involvement because of the positive benefits to their communities. Half the staff also stated that due to the change in non-profit tenant involvement policy, and the lack of resources, it would be unlikely that tenant involvement would continue in any significant way. As non-profit housing communities continue to face budget reductions, the social well-being of tenants will become less of a priority to management. Without the resources of an independent project, associations will be left to flounder on their own.





## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Tenants want to be involved in their communities and to participate in the decisions that affect their lives.
2. Tenants associations need the long-term support of a professional community developer to become established and to function successfully.
3. Both management and tenants need to have a clear understanding of the role of a tenants association and what it can and cannot accomplish before the association is established.
4. Misconceptions and past experiences with tenants associations may hinder tenant participation on associations. Clarifying role and purpose during initial organizing should alleviate anxiety and encourage participation.
5. Associations need access to professional facilitation and mediation skills to work through group issues and problems as they arise. Without this support, associations falter and may disband, leaving tenants with negative experiences and bitter feelings about associations. In these cases, associations may be more damaging to quality of life for tenants than never having an association.
6. It is more cost-efficient to resolve issues as they appear, then to try to work out issues that have manifested over time into complex and entrenched problems.
7. Associations need training in skills such as writing a constitution, committee structure, book-keeping, and developing mechanisms for tenants to influence management.
8. An outside mediator is useful for resolving tenant/tenant and tenant/management conflicts.
9. Non-profit housing budgets cannot always provide community development support and may indeed be in a conflict of interest to do so since a worker hired and paid for by management and not the tenants would have a natural bias to side with management in any disputes. An independent tenant organizer would be able to support many associations in a cost-efficient and non-conflictual manner.
10. Because tenants have a right to participate in the decisions that effect their lives, and because tenants create the most effective solutions to problems within their own communities, tenants need to be able to develop a mechanism which allows them to positively impact on management decisions.



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